Source Investigation: Religious Beliefs and Funerary Practices in Qin and Han China - Eden Tomes

# Inquiry Questions

## Key Inquiry Question:

* + How did religious beliefs during the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BCE-220 CE) influence funerary rituals and practices, and what do these practices reveal about ancient Chinese conceptions of the afterlife?

## Sub Questions:

1. What were the dominant philosophical and religious systems during the Qin and Han dynasties, and how did they shape beliefs about death and the afterlife?
2. How did the imperial burial traditions, particularly tomb architecture and artifacts, reflect the political ideologies and social hierarchies of the Qin and Han periods?
3. What specific funerary objects and practices (such as jade burial suits, mingqi figures, and animal symbols) were employed during this period, and what symbolic meanings did they hold?
4. How did regional variations and changes over time influence funerary practices throughout the Qin and Han dynasties, and what do these variations tell us about cultural diffusion and social dynamics?

# 1. Introduction (Approx. 10-15% of word count)

* Hook: Start with a compelling image or fact related to Qin/Han burials.
* Context: Briefly introduce the Qin and Han dynasties, timeframe, significance, and the importance of funerary practices.
* Scope & Focus: State the report’s aim to investigate the link between beliefs and funerary rituals to understand afterlife conceptions.
* Source Introduction: Briefly introduce the Terracotta Army, Shiji, Su et al. (2024), and Zhongyan & Abindinhazir (2025), noting their type and relevance.
* Thesis Statement: Present the main argument addressing the Key Inquiry Question.
* Report Structure: Briefly outline the main sections, including the critical summary before the conclusion.

# 2. Body Paragraphs / Sections (Approx. 15-20% each, totalling 65-75% of word count)

## Section 1: The Philosophical and Religious Landscape (Addresses Sub question 1)

* + Topic Sentence: Introduce main beliefs influencing views on death/afterlife (Ancestor Veneration, Spirits, Bureaucratic Afterlife, Immortality Cults, Confucianism, Legalism).
  + Source Integration: Use Shiji for textual evidence of beliefs/rituals; use Su et al. / Zhongyan & Abindinhazir to link symbolic motifs (jade, stone carvings) to these broader beliefs.

## Section 2: Imperial Burials, Ideology, and Social Hierarchy (Addresses Sub question 2)

* + Topic Sentence: Explain how imperial tombs expressed political power and social structure.
  + Discussion Points: Qin Shi Huang's tomb complex (power, control); Han imperial tombs (mimicking palaces, bureaucracy); Hierarchy reflected in scale/materials.
  + Source Integration: Analyze Terracotta Army (primary evidence); cite Shiji for descriptions; discuss motifs from Zhongyan & Abindinhazir reinforcing order.

## Section 3: Symbolic Funerary Objects and Practices (Addresses Sub question 3)

* + Topic Sentence: Focus on specific items and their meanings.
  + Discussion Points: Mingqi (Terracotta Army, servants, models); Jade (suits, discs, amulets); Animal Symbolism (dragon, phoenix, etc.); Other goods (bronze, lacquer).
  + Source Integration: Use Terracotta Army as mingqi examples; directly apply semiotic analyses from Su et al. (jade animals) and Zhongyan & Abindinhazir (stone motifs); check Shiji for mentions of valuable burial objects.

## Section 4: Variations and Changes Over Time (Addresses Sub question 4)

* + Topic Sentence: Explore evolution and variations in practices.
  + Discussion Points: Qin vs. Han differences (military vs. domestic/bureaucratic); Evolution within Han (tomb complexity, motifs); Potential regional differences; Implications for society/culture.
  + Source Integration: Compare Terracotta Army (Qin) with Han-focused sources; use Shiji (early Han) as a baseline; note chronological/regional points in secondary sources.

# 3. Critical Summary of Evidence (Approx. 5-10% of word count)

* Purpose: To synthesize the key findings drawn directly from the analysis of the four sources presented in the body paragraphs, evaluating their collective contribution to answering the inquiry questions.
* Content:
  + Briefly recap the primary evidence: What did the Terracotta Army reveal about Qin imperial power and afterlife provisions? What insights did Shiji offer regarding beliefs, rituals, or specific burial events?
  + Summarize the secondary analyses: How did Su et al.’s study illuminate the meaning of jade animals? What did Zhongyan & Abindinhazir conclude about the symbolism of Han stone carvings?
  + Synthesize across sources: How does the material evidence (Terracotta Army) align with or differ from the textual accounts (Shiji)? How do the specific semiotic analyses (Su et al., Zhongyan & Abindinhazir) add depth to understanding the broader archaeological and textual evidence?
  + Evaluate source contribution: Collectively, how strongly do these specific sources support the interpretations made about beliefs (afterlife bureaucracy, immortality), ideology (imperial power, hierarchy), and the meaning of funerary objects?
  + Acknowledge convergences/divergences/limitations noted during the analysis: Reiterate any points where sources confirmed each other, offered different perspectives, or where limitations (e.g., elite focus, potential bias in Shiji, specific scope of articles) became apparent through their use in the body sections. This is not about introducing new limitations, but summarizing those identified earlier.
* Function: Acts as a bridge between the detailed analysis and the final conclusions, consolidating the evidential basis for the overall argument.

# 4. Conclusion (Approx. 10-15% of word count)

* Synthesis: Reiterate the main argument (thesis) in new words, drawing on the findings summarized in the previous section. Emphasize how the analysed evidence demonstrates the influence of specific beliefs on funerary practices.
* Answer Key Question: Explicitly state what the investigation, based on the evaluated evidence, reveals about ancient Chinese conceptions of the afterlife.
* Significance: Briefly discuss the broader implications for understanding Qin/Han society, politics, and worldview.
* Limitations (Broader): Briefly mention any overarching limitations of the study not already covered in the summary of evidence (e.g., the selection of only four sources, the inherent limitations of interpreting symbolic meaning across millennia).
* Concluding Thought: End with a final, insightful remark.

# 5. Bibliography / Reference List

* List sources in APA 7 citation style.

# **Quiz**

* What was the dominant philosophy during the Qin Dynasty, and how did it influence the state's approach to competing ideas?

The dominant philosophy throughout the Qin Dynasty was Legalism, which primarily consisted of the emperor having absolute authority, meaning that those with differing philosophies would be oppressed.

* Besides Legalism, what other belief systems were likely present during the Qin Dynasty, particularly regarding death and the afterlife?
* What philosophical system became the state orthodoxy during the Han Dynasty, and what was one of its core principles relevant to funerary practices?
* How did the Mandate of Heaven ideology influence imperial funerary practices during the Qin Dynasty?
* What was the primary function of the Terracotta Army found in Emperor Qin Shi Huang's tomb?
* What was the purpose of jade burial suits for the elite during the Han Dynasty?
* What are mingqi, and what do their inclusion in Han tombs suggest about beliefs regarding the afterlife?
* Describe the dual soul concept prevalent during the Qin and Han dynasties.
* What is ancestor veneration, and why was it consistently important in both the Qin and Han dynasties?
* What is one significant difference and one significant continuity between Qin and Han funerary practices mentioned in the text?

Essay Questions

Analyze the ways in which the dominant philosophical and religious beliefs of the Qin and Han dynasties directly shaped the specific types of funerary practices observed in each period.

Compare and contrast the influence of political ideology on imperial funerary practices in the Qin and Han dynasties, using specific examples like the Terracotta Army and Han imperial tombs.

Discuss how the social hierarchies of the Qin and Han dynasties were reflected in the scale, complexity, and grave goods found in tombs across different social strata.

Evaluate the archaeological evidence presented in the text (Terracotta Army, jade suits, mingqi) as indicators of ancient Chinese conceptions of the afterlife during the Qin and Han periods.

Examine the continuities and changes in funerary practices from the Qin to the Han Dynasty, and explain what these shifts reveal about the evolving social, political, and religious landscape of ancient China.

Glossary of Key Terms

Ancestor Veneration: The practice of honoring and showing respect for deceased family members, often involving rituals and offerings, based on a belief in their continued existence and potential influence.

Confucianism: A philosophical and ethical system emphasizing social harmony, hierarchical relationships, filial piety, and the importance of ritual. It became the state orthodoxy during the Han Dynasty.

Dual Soul: A belief, prevalent in ancient China, that individuals possessed two souls, typically the hun (spiritual/rational) and the po (physical/earthbound).

Filial Piety: A cornerstone of Confucianism, emphasizing respect and obedience towards one's parents and elders, which extended to the proper honoring of deceased ancestors.

Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE): A major imperial dynasty in Chinese history that solidified and expanded upon the foundations laid by the Qin, known for establishing Confucianism as state orthodoxy and developing a merit-based bureaucracy.

Jade Burial Suits: Elaborate funerary garments made of small jade plaques sewn together, used by the elite during the Han Dynasty, believed to preserve the body and ward off evil spirits.

Legalism: A school of Chinese philosophy emphasizing strict laws, centralized power, and the absolute authority of the ruler, dominant during the Qin Dynasty.

Mandate of Heaven: A political and religious doctrine used to justify the rule of the emperor in ancient China, suggesting that their authority was granted by a divine power and could be revoked if they ruled unjustly.

Mingqi ("spirit goods"): Miniature replicas of everyday objects, such as houses, furniture, and servants, included in tombs during the Han Dynasty to provide for the deceased's needs in the afterlife.

Po: The soul associated with the physical body, believed to remain with the deceased in the tomb.

Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE): The first unified imperial dynasty of China, known for its Legalist ideology, centralized power, and the construction of monumental projects like the Great Wall and the Terracotta Army.

Terracotta Army: A vast collection of life-sized terracotta soldiers, horses, and chariots found near the mausoleum of Emperor Qin Shi Huang, symbolizing his military power and ambition for the afterlife.

Taoism: A philosophical and religious tradition emphasizing living in harmony with the Tao (the Way), often exploring concepts of immortality, nature, and spontaneity, and influencing beliefs about the afterlife in the Han Dynasty.

Yellow Springs: An underworld or subterranean realm in ancient Chinese mythology, sometimes conceived as a destination for the soul after death.

Answer Key

The dominant philosophy during the Qin Dynasty was Legalism, which emphasized strict laws and central control. This led the Qin regime to actively suppress competing ideologies like Confucianism through actions such as burning books and executing scholars.

Besides Legalism, early forms of Chinese folk religion, including the veneration of spirits and ancestors, were likely present during the Qin Dynasty. The personal obsession of Emperor Qin Shi Huang with immortality also suggests a belief in an afterlife that transcended Legalist doctrine.

Confucianism became the state orthodoxy during the Han Dynasty. A core principle of Confucianism relevant to funerary practices is filial piety, which emphasized honoring deceased ancestors and maintaining a connection with them.

The Mandate of Heaven ideology, which granted the emperor absolute authority, heavily influenced imperial funerary practices during the Qin Dynasty. Emperor Qin Shi Huang's massive tomb complex and the Terracotta Army reflect his belief in extending his earthly dominion and power into the afterlife, supported by the state's ability to mobilize vast resources.

The primary function of the Terracotta Army was to symbolize Emperor Qin Shi Huang's military power and ambition to continue his rule and have his army protect him in the afterlife, mirroring his earthly authority.

Jade burial suits were used by the elite during the Han Dynasty because jade was believed to possess properties that could preserve the body from decay and protect it from evil spirits in the afterlife.

Mingqi were miniature replicas of everyday objects placed in Han tombs to provide the deceased with everything they would need in the afterlife. Their widespread use suggests a belief in an afterlife that was a continuation of earthly existence, requiring similar provisions and comforts.

The dual soul concept involved the belief that an individual had a hun soul (spiritual/rational) that might ascend after death and a po soul (physical/earthbound) that remained with the body in the tomb.

Ancestor veneration is the practice of honoring deceased family members. It was consistently important in both the Qin and Han dynasties because of the strong belief in the enduring presence and influence of ancestral spirits, who were thought to affect the fortunes of the living.

One significant difference is the shift from Legalism to Confucianism as the dominant state philosophy. One significant continuity is the enduring importance of ancestor veneration throughout both dynasties.